

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans

Witness Testimony

Statement of Founder/President Kirk R. Thomas
Wheelin' Sportsmen of America, Inc.
before the
U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Resources
and the Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation,
Wildlife & Oceans
May 14, 1998

H.R. 2760, The Disabled Sportsmen's Access Act

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee. I very much appreciate the opportunity to testify before you on behalf of H.R. 2760, the Disabled Sportsmen's Access Act. I would also like to thank Representative Cunningham and Senator Burns for their leadership in introducing this bill. It is a tremendous honor to represent all persons with disabilities as well as Wheelin' Sportsmen of America, Inc. (WSA) in my testimony.

People with disabilities represent our nation's largest minority group. Presently there are approximately fifty-four (54) million individuals in the United States with a disability. This includes approximately nine (9) million disabled veterans. Unfortunately, these numbers increase every day. Since the enactment of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990, opportunities for people with disabilities has improved. Unfortunately, there has not been much concentrated improvement to allow the disabled community the opportunity to participate in outdoor recreational activities. Outdoor recreation is extremely important for people with disabilities because it promotes such positive goals as good health and educational experiences, as well as helping build confidence, character and self-esteem-all of which contribute to a remarkable improvement toward the enjoyment and quality of life.

The approval of H.R. 2760 would have a tremendous impact on future opportunities for people with disabilities to enjoy the outdoor resources that should be available to all Americans.

The emphasis of WSA is teamwork. We accomplish our goals and objectives not only by teaming up disabled and non-disabled individuals to accomplish outdoor recreational goals, but also by working with other groups and organizations that are interested in our efforts to provide these opportunities for all people with disabilities. The opportunity to participate is the key for most participants. WSA is unique in that we recognize and provide opportunity for all levels of disability. We realize the difficulty in providing opportunity for everyone, but we see this as a challenge, not an obstacle. It is our intention to see the outdoors made accessible to all. Teamwork can make this a reality.

The thousands of members of WSA and I are proud to step forward as leaders and actively campaign and assist in obtaining approval for H.R. 2760. We also understand that H.R. 2760 presents a tremendous

teamwork opportunity for everyone.

I encourage the Department of Defense to see H.R. 2760 as the catalyst it could be for millions of Americans to work together in providing outdoor recreation for themselves and others. I look forward to the future and to the opportunities we will encounter in our efforts to make a difference in the lives of many. It is not my intention to see the outdoors made accessible, just available. Teamwork can make this a reality.

SUPPORT IS KEY

Around 8:30 a.m. on the morning of November 27, 1992, my life, as I knew it, changed forever. Little did I know that enjoying one of life's activities that I loved so much would contribute to my accident, leaving me a T-12 paraplegic and confined to a wheelchair. As I lay on the ground with my backbone crushed completely into, choking on blood and experiencing indescribable pain, I can remember praying what I thought would be my last prayer. I can also remember the prayer that followed hours later as well. While hard to admit, the subject of this prayer was me asking God to take my life and let me die. I know in my heart this prayer was heard and I am very thankful that the answer was no.

I am a strong believer that everything happens for a reason and has a purpose behind it. I don't believe in luck, good or bad. I realize my accident has given me the opportunity to experience many tremendous blessings. I have discovered many reasons to see my disability as a blessing. I am now a better Christian, husband, father and man. I also now see life with a different perspective and have learned to find the positives and overcome the negatives of life. I have accepted my disability and now consider it an inconvenience. I am not making light of it, but there have been a lot of factors that have contributed to my success in helping me overcome my disability.

The tremendous support I received from my family, employer, friends and others has been a tremendous blessing and has been a key factor in overcoming my disability. Unfortunately, many disabled individuals do not receive the support they need. This knowledge contributed greatly to the creation of Wheelin' Sportsmen of America, Inc. Dealing with a disability is hard. How you deal with a disability is what makes the difference. Some of these individuals do good, some do bad and all could do better. WSA is designed to contribute support to enable everyone to do better.

WHAT IS WSA?

Wheelin' Sportsmen of America, Inc., headquartered in Montgomery, AL, is a non-profit association dedicated to providing individuals with disabilities the opportunity to enjoy the outdoors again, or even for the first time. It was formed by a group of disabled and non-disabled individuals who share a common interest in outdoor activities. Providing individuals with disabilities the opportunity to participate in outdoor activities is the primary goal of WSA, while promoting good health, good character, good sportsmanship and disability awareness are essential secondary objectives. WSA activities and services are designed to overcome the six barriers that prevent or limit the disabled individual's ability to enjoy the great outdoors which are:

1. Being overlooked
2. Difficulty of activity
3. Communication gaps
4. Lack of opportunity
5. Expense
6. Lack of assistance.

Through organized programs and activities for able-bodied and disabled members, WSA overcomes these barriers by: locating those in need of help, providing member assistance and communicating. The passage of

H.R. 2760 would greatly expand WSA's resources to provide such assistance to the disabled.

Another main goal of WSA is to establish a nationwide network of disabled and non-disabled members. As the two member groups are built into the network, members can choose and participate as partners in preferred outdoor activities. Participation is completely at the discretion of members. In addition, WSA provides organized member events ranging from golf tournaments and hunting, to fishing roundups and many other outdoor activities.

WSA is governed by five (5) officers and twelve (12) board members. These officers and members include both non-disabled and disabled individuals. The organization recognizes that any type of disability can present unique challenges to those with outdoor interests.

WSA is a non-profit association organized under section 501(c) of the Internal Revenue Code. Member categories include disabled members who represent all disabilities, non-disabled members who assist the disabled when necessary, associate members and corporate members.

WSA ALABAMA

Since founding WSA in March 1996, I have seen the organization experience tremendous growth. In Alabama alone our membership is approximately 4,000 and continues to grow daily. Several thousand more participants have taken part in WSA activities in Alabama. Some of these events include catfish roundups, fun & learn days, all types of hunting and fishing, shooting sports, archery, outdoor shows and fundraisers. WSA state charters will be patterned after the success of WSA Alabama. We are excited about this tremendous growth and look forward to granting charters in all fifty (50) states.

WSA NATIONWIDE

The WSA national goal is to organize state charters to represent the organizational goals and objectives of Wheelin' Sportsmen of America, Inc. The states of Mississippi, Florida, and Georgia are already in the process of establishing charters. Several more states are in the developmental stages and have applied for charter criteria.

Once WSA began, we knew it would be accepted simply because it was needed. Little did we know that our enrollment of members and participants would explode as quickly as it has. We are proud of the accomplishments that we have made and look forward to the challenge, work and expansion of WSA.

WSA PROMOTIONAL RESOURCES

Upon passage of H.R. 2760, WSA is prepared to promote activities on available lands through resources presently being utilized by the organization including our television show, organizational presentations, our quarterly newsletter, media coverage, individual and group events, and representation at outdoor trade shows.

Wheelin' Sportsmen Outdoors

"Wheelin' Sportsmen Outdoors" (WSO) began production of its first national television series on January 1, 1998. Accepted by America One, an affiliate of Liberty Sports Fox Network, and is broadcast nationally as well regionally on WCOV Channel 20/Montgomery and WDFX Channel 34/Dothan. WSO is a subsidiary

of Wheelin' Sportsmen of America, Inc. and the purpose of the show is to promote the goals and objectives of WSA, Inc. WSO is presently negotiating to increase its current coverage of 40 million homes to reach the maximum number of households.

Organizational Presentations

WSA also regularly provides presentations to various types of organizations to increase awareness and educate the public about the organization. These informative speaking engagements allow members the opportunity to directly promote the organization to perspective sponsors, civic organizations, disabled and non-disabled groups, churches, or others interested in learning more about WSA. During each presentation, members share their own special experiences and enthusiasm about WSA in their own words. In addition to inspirational member testimonials, an action-oriented slide presentation, videotapes and photography provide a first-hand look at WSA's diverse range of events and activities. Providing these presentations has proven successful in promoting the organization and its worthwhile programs and events. WSA welcomes the opportunity to speak to other organizations. For more information on our presentations, please call the national office at 1-888-832-6967.

Makin' Tracks Newsletter

WSA's organizational newsletter, "Makin' Tracks", is published quarterly to keep members informed of the latest Wsa activities and organizational changes. Like the WSA organization, the newsletter's growth has exceeded members' expectations. WSA strives to make "Makin' Tracks" informative and interesting, while revealing the heartwarming aspects of WSA's mission. Each issue is filled with the latest news about WSA's upcoming and completed events, updated information on the activities of the northern, central and southern WSA districts, and touching letters and photos. In addition, each issue includes a calendar of upcoming events.

The newsletter is available at no cost to members, sponsors and anyone interested in receiving a copy. WSA mails copies to members and sponsor upon publication. To further market the organization, copies of the latest issues are available at trade shows, WSA presentations, and events.

WSA is proud of "Makin' Tracks", but at its current rate of growth, it is only a matter of time before Makin' Tracks evolves into a magazine. Therefore, WSA is now offering advertising opportunities to assist our organization with publishing costs. Ad sales are essential to the continued publishing and success of "Makin' Tracks" and most importantly, of WSA. If you are interested in placing an ad, please contact the local office.

Media Coverage

WSA has developed a beautiful working relationship with the media which it is working hard to maintain. This relationship has helped WSA increase its public awareness efforts and will continue to be vital to the organization's progress and to the achievement of its goals and objectives including our primary goal of promoting the value of our organization and opportunities for people with disabilities.

WSA and its various activities have received comprehensive media coverage from a variety of print and broadcast media outlets including local, state and national newspapers, newsletters, magazines, television news and outdoor television and radio program coverage.

Individual and Group Events

A variety of exciting events is offered by WSA for individuals and groups which promote opportunities for the disabled, WSA, its co-sponsors and volunteers. Regular events which are hosted in various locations include Catfish Roundups, Fun and Learn Days and other hunting and fishing outings. There is also a Wheelin' Classic golf tournament which is held annually. And WSA continues to add to the list!

Two of our most popular events are the Catfish Roundups and fun and Learn Days. Approximately 400 disabled people-children and adults-participated in WSA's first Catfish Roundup held in 1996. WSA works closely with the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources and their divisions to schedule these events at sites in each state. To ensure there is no problem catching fish and enjoying the day, WSA supplies the catfish, lunch and refreshments. Each disabled participants is presented a trophy and other prizes including the fish he or she catches. Fun and Learn Days allow participants the opportunity to learn and participate in a variety of outdoor activities including archery, various types of shooting sports, and fishing. Each disabled participants has a non-disabled participant to assist them. Sponsorships are vital to the continued success of these events and are available for any of our planned activities.

Outdoor Trade Shows & Product Endorsements

WSA participates in outdoor trade shows to increase the visibility of the organization, its members and sponsors, to provide valuable communication opportunities and to further enhance opportunities for the disabled. Trade show booths are manned by highly motivated members and volunteers. WSA literature and membership information is available and show attendees are drawn to the WSA booth by photos displaying our wide range of activities, "Wheelin' Sportsmen Outdoors" show broadcast to illustrate the excitement and depth of the organization's outdoor activities and merchandise raffles, which also provide an excellent fundraising opportunity. Merchandise is also available for purchase. WSA membership is not required for show participation, which is open to all children and adults.

As a result of WSA's success, manufacturers of hunting and fishing equipment have approached Wheelin' Sportsmen of America, Inc. about product endorsements. Subsequently, WSA has developed a method of requirements to determine the selection process for endorsements. This process will be used to determine whether a product is beneficial to the needs of both our disabled and non-disabled members. WSA encourages any manufacturers, organizations or individuals interested in having WSA endorse products or ideas, which will benefit WSA members and the organization, to call the national WSA office at 1-888-832-6967.

Additional WSA Highlights

- * WSA has secured approximately 13,000 acres in Mississippi for future outdoor recreational activities.
- * WSA has a product line of merchandise to help in promoting the organization.
- * WSA has developed a Taxidermy Referral Program to offset cost for its members.
- * WSA is presently working with a National Record Scoring System in the development of a scoring system for people with disabilities.

* WSA is presently developing a Hunting/Fishing Exchange Program for its members.

* WSA is presently evaluating many additional opportunities that will be of benefit to our organization as well as our members.

#